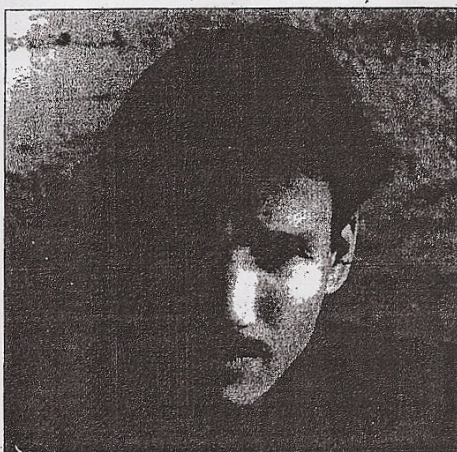




Columnist Robert De Andreis

Remember my name

by ROBERT DE ANDREIS

This is another week that I could have easily passed and told *The Sentinel* I was on vacation. I've been hit with some difficult news, but before I disclose it, I need to set a boundary with a few zealous readers out there.

Just because I reveal so many personal things about myself doesn't give anyone permission to cross any additional lines. The last time I mentioned I had pneumonia, a few pushy readers called *The Sentinel* to see how I was doing and a few ruder people called my parents to check up on me! That is entirely inappropriate and not appreciated. If you're so concerned about my health, the best thing you can do is respect my privacy.

Also, this is not the time in my life I want to hear from old friends from out of the blue just because I am sick. These are the sort who ditched me a long time ago, never once offered me help during previous bouts, and wouldn't be showing up at all if my work hadn't gained all this recent popularity.

I had an uncanny knack for gravitating toward self-absorbed users for most of my life, and this is the big payoff. Besides, what the hell would I even want to say to them anyway? You all know who you are, and you can just thank God I haven't thoroughly trashed your big, fat asses in print — and I will if I hear one more phony, last-minute show of concern. Save it for someone who appreciates your biased of friendship.

I am not bitter, I have forgiven them, it just doesn't mean I need to be reminded of them.

Next week, I scheduled a simple talk and reading, most likely the last public appearance I'll give. I can't imagine in the next six months I'll be in any better shape to pull something like this off again. Your beloved columnist is falling apart right before your watchful eyes, so pull out a hankie and blow your nose because it's going to get worse. Quick, do yourself a favor: Flip over to the arts section, scan the personals, read anything but my bad news column.

I'm on some pain medication that leaves me with an unshakable grogginess. I can't fully wake up today. Forgive me — it's frustrating me more than you'll know. This whole week has been way too heavy. I could hardly focus on writing. As it is, I'm not even sure how comfortable I am disclosing my latest diagnosis, because it feels way too vulnerable to reveal.

I've hit a brick wall in my AIDS illness. I've been diagnosed with something serious, nearly fatal, for which there is little treatment. Actually, there is chemotherapy, but at this stage in my final health, the treatment may prove worse than the natural progression of

the disease. That seems to be the only sense of power and control I have over it at this point — the ability to refuse treatment. My body, with my bone marrow already shot to hell, would fall apart quickly on chemo. Even at a low dose, it might be too low to be effective.

Basically, with what I have, chemo doesn't make it go away — it's not like cancer, where the possibility exists for remission, although chemo might slow the spread. But I am convinced that chemotherapy will mess up all the other frail systems in my body and leave me wide open for other infections.

They, uh, well, I mean, (gulp) uh, uh, OK ... yikes! They found extensive KS in my lungs! I've been coughing so much these days that I tore a muscle in my side which has made it so difficult for me to clear my windpipes of that eerie wheezing I hear constantly. It's been hell trying to sleep some nights with my painful side and all that rattling in my lungs. This is a slow-moving cancer, it won't engulf me over night, but eventually I'll have to deal with those nasty concepts of that suffocating-like drowning feeling, like Esther Williams trapped underneath a glass AIDS pool — smiling, synchronizing, looking fabulous, yet still coughing up unsightly bits of lung tissue.

Eventually, I was going to walk into my doctor's office and get that brick wall diagnosis, and you knew one day you'd be reading about it. I'm telling you this because we are beginning some kind of

home stretch that may drag on for a very long time (which is actually terrible news, if you think about it), or something that could end sooner than you think.

I'm just more vulnerable these days and I want you to respect that. I don't want to be bothered by people from my past who have weird trips for me to deal with. I need to keep the emotional stress down to a minimum. I'll keep you posted more or less with what's going on with me, but I'm not making any promises. This June is the two-year anniversary of my first column with *The Sentinel*. Back then, I said I would write all the way to the end. It seemed like an easy thing to say at that time, but I don't know if I'll be able to handle it every week. I've been terribly drowsy today: It's been like one of those frustration dreams where you can run, but you can't move, so please bear with me. I'm doing the best I can.

This whole experience at *The Sentinel*, and it's not over yet, has been a last-minute gift I gave myself as I finally released the writer I always knew was inside me — unfortunately, it was at a time when there were a few other nasty things inside of me as well. In many ways, the fatality of my prognosis has been overshadowed by the strange feeling of comfort that somewhere — in the folders and files of letters from readers (some of whom have told me they save clippings of my articles), my journals and personal papers that I am donating to the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society and in the

hearts and minds of my readers — that I will live on in spirit long after my body is gone. Even if I don't, I know I'll never forget you.

Robert De Andreis will give a talk and reading 1 p.m. June 3 at Metropolitan Community Church (150 Eureka St.).